The lived experience of LGBTQ+ People in rural/ regional Australia

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Introduction

LGBTQ+ people in rural and regional Australia report **lower levels of psychological well-being** compared to their metro peers (ACON, 2022; LGBTIQ+ Health Australia, 2021; National Rural Health Alliance, 2021)

This is due to **socio-environmental factors prevalent or perceived** within these communities that privilege heterosexuality, displacing other identities (Marlin et al., 2022)

But, there is **limited data** that focuses specifically on rural LGBTQ+ Australians with extant studies taking a broad view when sampling the LGBTQ+ communities, typically attaining samples that are skewed towards metro locations.

The aim

The aim of this study was to examine the **factors that contribute to the psychological wellbeing** of LGBTQ+ rural/regional Australians.

It is well established that **stressors detrimentally impact psychological wellbeing** but **protective** factors can play a buffering role.

The literature highlights rural LGBTQ+ Australians experience **continued** real and expected **discrimination** (Lewis & Redshaw, 2024), feel a need to **manage their identity** (Lewis & Redshaw, 2024), have **limited access** to LGBTQ+ services (Lewis, 2020), and together for these reasons, feel like they **do not belong**.

The components

Factor	Explanation	Example Studies
Sense of community belonging	• Encompasses feelings of acceptance, support and connectedness within a community context. • Generally, has been linked with behaviour change like vaccine uptake, and positive social outcomes. • Amongst LGBTQ+ people it has been shown to buffer against depressive symptoms and enhance life satisfaction.	Allen et al., 2021; Chai, 2023; Marlin et al., 2022; Tolan et al., 2001
Perceived daily discrimination	• Discrimination correlates with increased depressive symptoms, loneliness, and lower quality of life among LGBT individual. • Has been linked to maladaptive behaviours including binge eating. • Everyday discrimination scale considers unfair treatment in daily life targeted at marginalised groups	Jackson et al., 2019; Mason, et etl., 2017; Meyer, 1995; Williams et al., 1997
Identity management	• Strategies employed to navigate sexual and gender identities in various contexts in response to social stigma considering passing and revealing. • Can be both conscious and unconscious measures put in place – and can be seen to provide agency over one's environment. • Identity management can add to the stress the individual experiences because of the need for constant vigilance.	Button, 2004; Chrobot-Mason et al., 2001; Lewis & Redshaw, 2024; Ro & Olson, 2020; Testa et al., 2014
Degree of outness	• How 'out' the individual is about their sexual orientation or gender identity generally, and to specific groups like family, friends, LGBTQ+ friends, co-workers, and the public generally. • High levels of outness correlate with better health management behaviours (HIV testing) • High and low levels can be linked to greater stress because of the duality of the prejudice one is exposed to, and the need to be constantly vigilant about how one expresses themselves.	Gios et al., 2021; Ro & Olson, 2020; Meyer et al., 2010; Wijngaarden & Ojanen, 2016
Access to LGBTQ+ services	• Considers access to specific services for LGBTQ+ people, services that are welcoming of LGBTQ+ people, and spaces that use LGBTQ+ symbolism. • Access to support services can act as a protective buffer helping validate identities and provide a safe environment to seek care.	Lewis, 2020; Marlin et al., 2022

The Method

Online survey: LOI: 15 minutes. Administered via Qualtrics.

Distributed online: via LGBTQ+ social media groups/advocacy/support organisation, state Mental Health Commissions, paid advertising.

Survey components:

- **Section A**: Screeners

  Age, Orientation/Identity, Location (Aus)

- **Section B**: Community Lived Experience

  Psychological Wellbeing (Ryff, 1995), Sense of community belonging (Tolan et al., 2001), Daily discrimination scale (Williams et al., 1997), Identity management (Ro & Olson, 2020; Testa et al., 2014), Degree of outness (Ro & Olson, 2020; Meyer et al., 2010).

- **Section C:** Community Descriptors

  LGBTQ+ Specific services, LGBTQ+ welcoming services, LGBTQ+ symbolism, OE: Changes in the last 12months, and OE: Changes needed.

- **Section D:** Sample Socio-economic descriptors

  Employment, Income, Education, Relationship status, Cultural background, Religious background

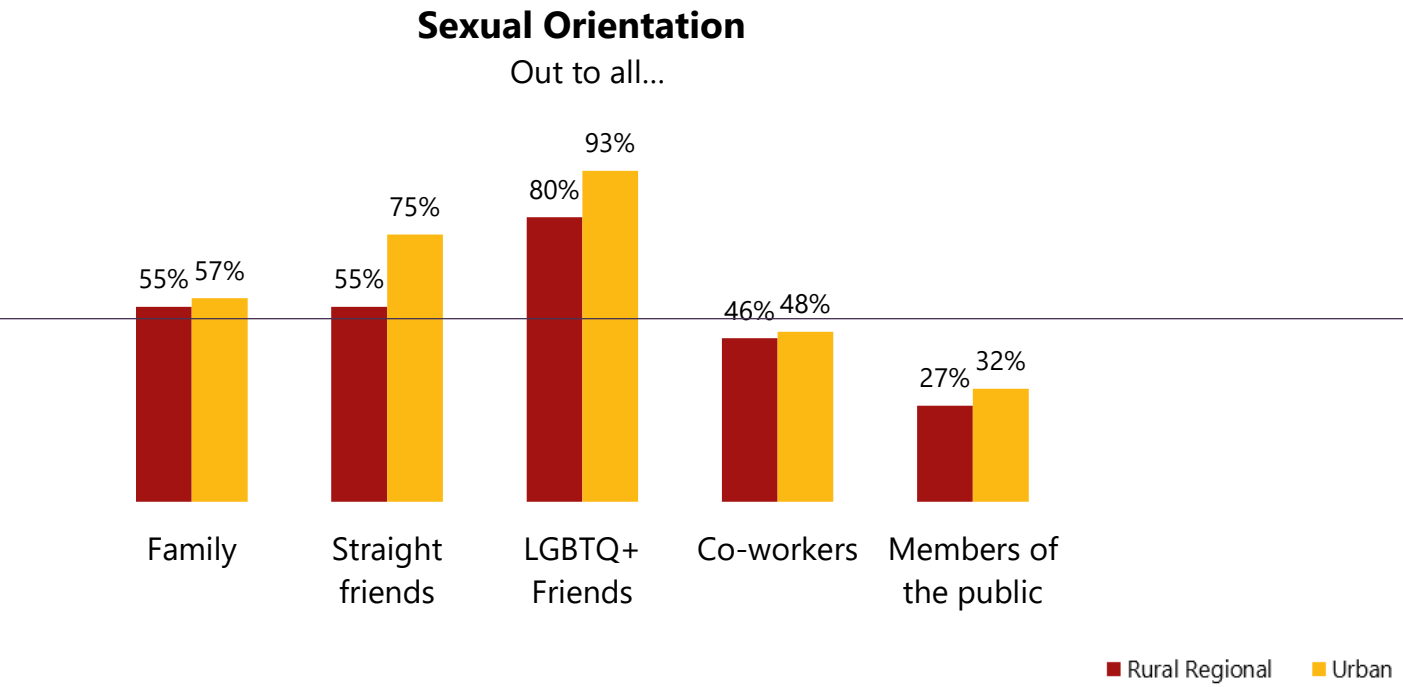
The Sample

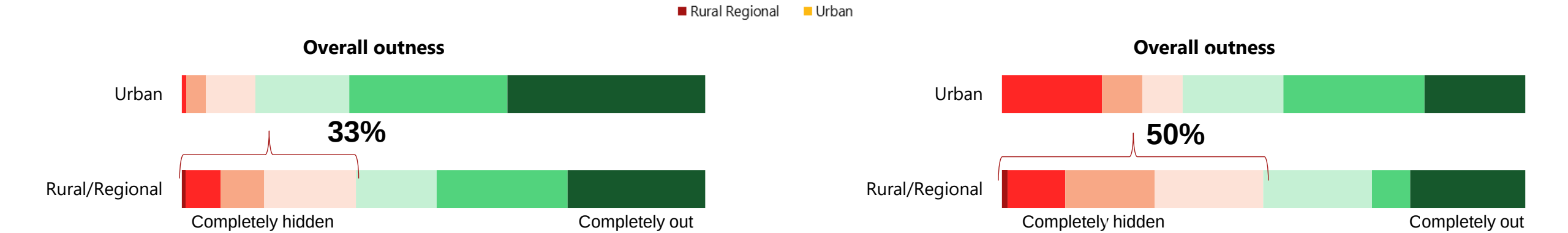
Age	Rural Regional	Urban
Average Age	40.08	36.5
Sexual orientation	%	
Monosexual	50.2	61.1
Plurisexual	49.8	39.9
Gender	%	
Man or male	32.3	48.1
Woman or Female	47.4	35.2
Non-Binary	20.3	16.7
Gender	Rural	Urban
Cisgender	66.1	75.9
Trans/Gender Diverse	33.9	24.1

Cultural Background	Rural Regional	Urban
First Nations Australian	2.8	1.9
Australian	56.2	34.3
Maori/Polynesian	0.4	0
European	6.4	15.7
Asian	1.6	10.2
North American	2.0	0
South/Central America	0	0.9
North African/M. Eastern	0.8	1.9
Multiple	27.5	33.3
Relationship status	%	
Partnered	51.0	61.1
Unpartnered	49.0	38.9

Income Level	Rural Regional	Urban
Above average	27.1	45.4
Average	28.7	29.6
Below average	43.8	24.0
Employment		
Full-time	43.8	65.7
Part-time	34.3	21.3
Not working	21.9	13.0
Education		
Primary/Secondary/Vocatio	35.5	16.7
University Degree	64.5	83.3

Degree of Outness





n = 251 rural/regional, *n* = 108 metro
n = 111 Transgender/Gender Diverse

The Findings

Rural LGBTQ+ people scored significantly lower than urban LGBTQ+ people on:

- Overall level of outness
- Psychological well-being
- Sense of belonging.

Rural LGBTQ+ people scored significantly higher than urban LGBTQ+ people on:

- Discrimination experiences
- Sexual orientation identity management: Passing
- Gender Identity management

Variable	Score range	Rural/Regional	Urban	Stat. Sig.	Effect size
Sense of community belonging	7-42	4.61	5.09	✓	medium
SO Identity mgmt Passing	7-49	21.68	17.68	✓	medium
SO Identity mgmt Revealing	3-21	13.37	13.26	×	-
GI Identity management	5-35	21.01	17.19	✓	medium
Everyday Discrimination	9-63	26.06	20.95	✓	medium
Psychological Wellbeing	18-126	98.69	100.99	✓	small

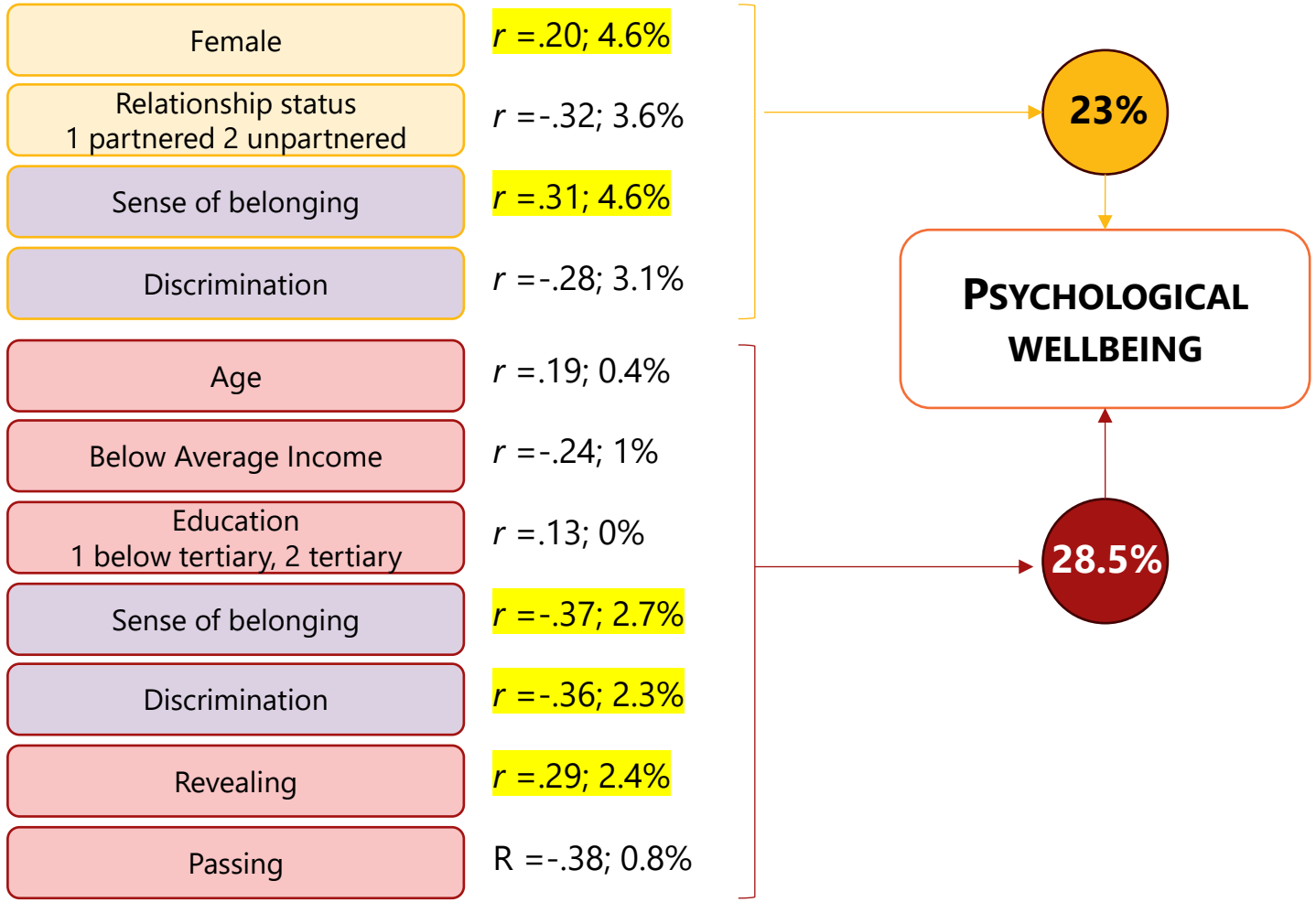
n = 251 rural/regional, *n* = 108 metro
t-test

The drivers of psychological wellbeing

Step 1: Correlations of variables

Variable	Rural/Regional	Urban
Age	✓	×
Female[a]	×	✓
Nonbinary[a]	×	×
Gender Identity[b]	×	×
Sexual Identity[c]	×	×
Average Income[d]	×	×
Below Average Income[d]	✓	×
Works part-time[e]	×	×
Not working[e]	×	×
Education[f]	✓	×
Relationship Status[g]	×	✓
Sense of Belonging	✓	✓
Discrimination	✓	✓
Revealing	✓	×
Passing	✓	×

Step 2: Regression models



[a]reference group is male. [b]1 = cisgender, 2 = transgender/gender diverse. [c]1= monosexual, 2 = plurisexual. [d]reference groups is above average income. [e]reference group is working full-time. [f]1= below tertiary, 2 = tertiary. [g]1 = partnered, 2 = unpartnered.

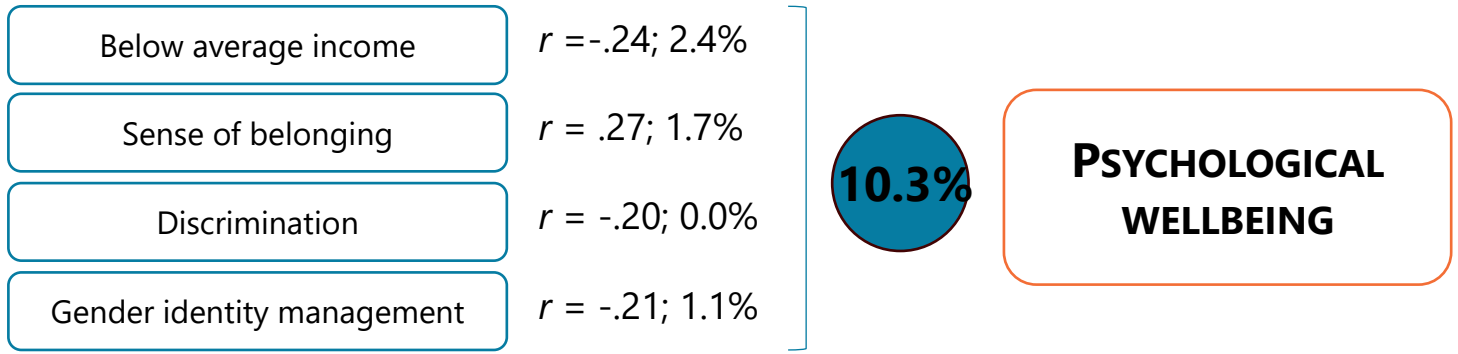
n = 251 rural/regional, *n* = 108 metro

The drivers of psychological wellbeing

Step 1: Correlations of variables

Variable	Significant r
Age	×
Gender Identity[a]	×
Sexual Identity[b]	×
Average Income[c]	×
Below Average Income[c]	✓
Works part-time[d]	×
Not working[d]	×
Education[e]	×
Relationship Status[f]	×
Place of Residence[g]	×
Sense of Belonging	✓
Discrimination	✓
Gender Identity Management	✓

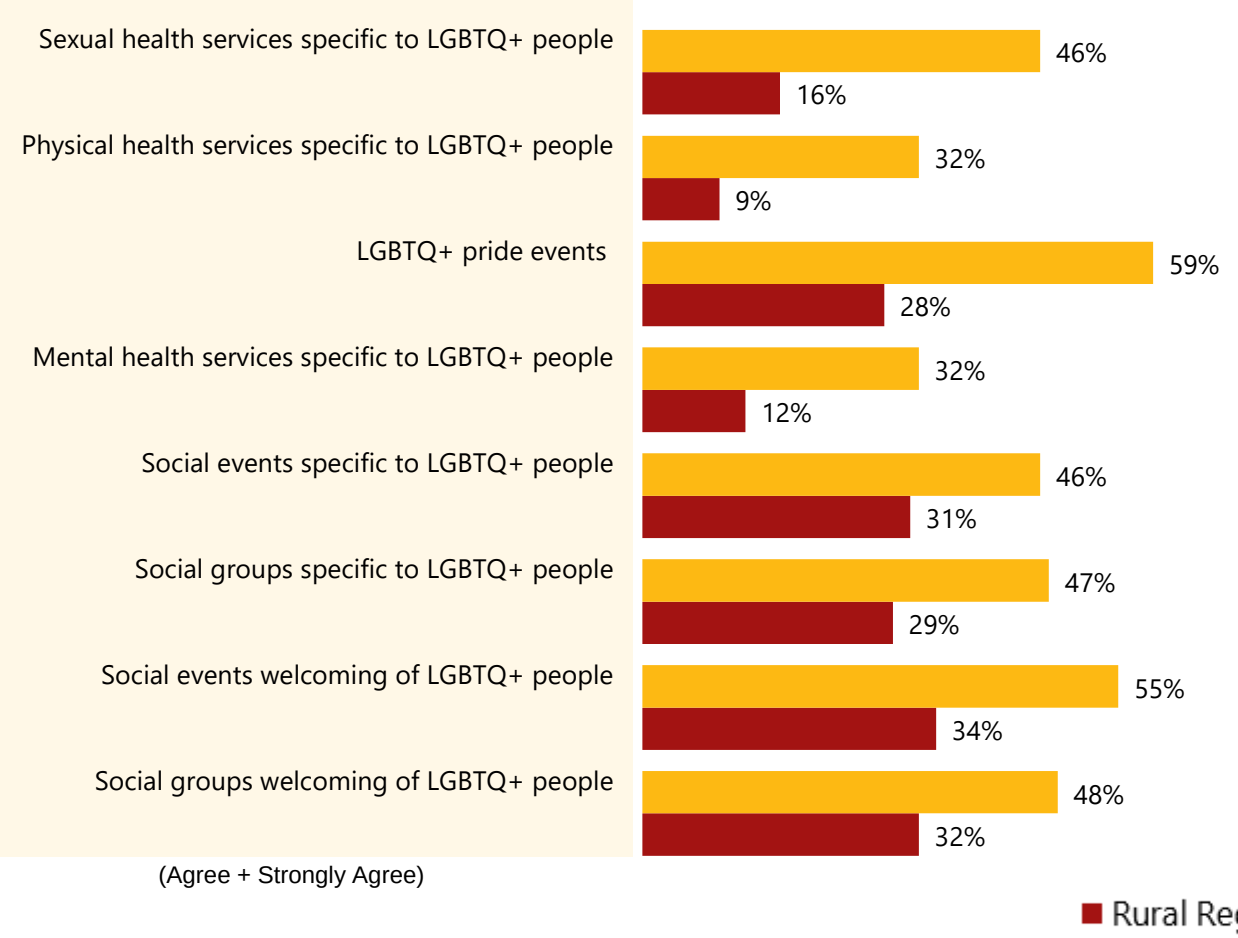
Step 2: Regression models

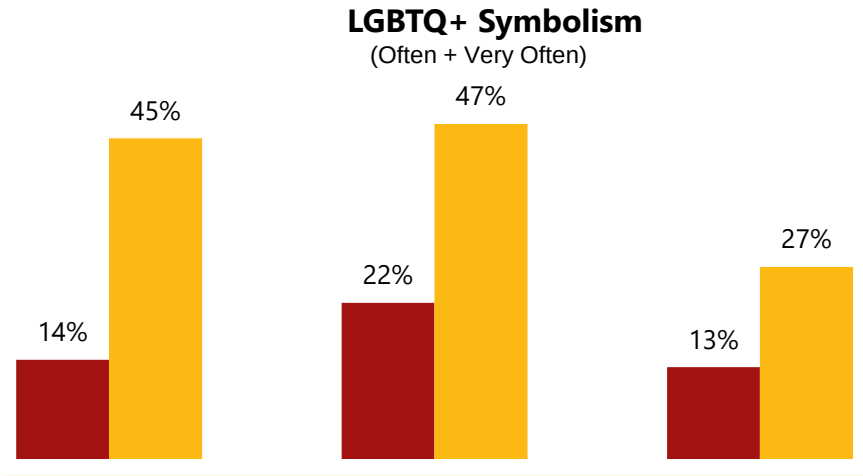


[a]1 = transgender, 2 = nonbinary. [b]1= monosexual, 2 = plurisexual. [c]reference group is above average income. [d]reference group is working full-time. [e]1= below tertiary, 2 = tertiary. [f]1 = partnered, 2 = unpartnered. [g]1 = urban, 2=rural.

n = 111 Transgender/Gender Diverse

Community access





ACON Welcome Here
Advertising/TV Shows
Car Stickers/Pins/Badges/pronoun tags
Clothing
Coles
LGBT Posters/Posters for events
Murals

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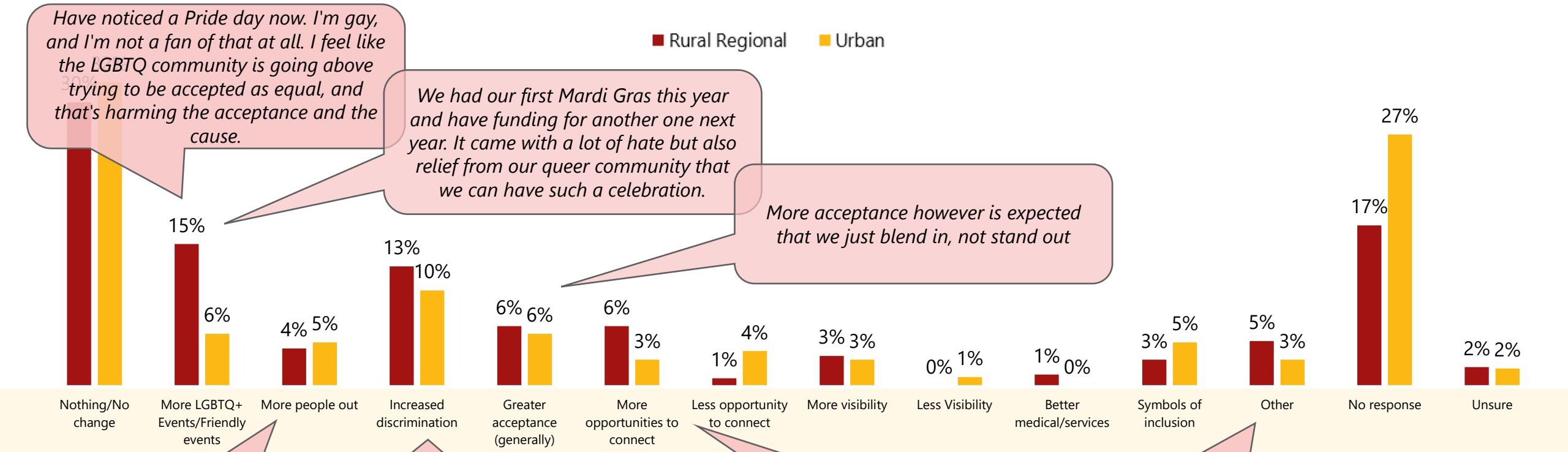
The changes in the last 12 months

What changes had our participants noticed in the 12 months prior?



Have noticed a Pride day now. I'm gay, and I'm not a fan of that at all. I feel like the LGBTQ community is going above trying to be accepted as equal, and that's harming the acceptance and the cause.

We had our first Mardi Gras this year and have funding for another one next year. It came with a lot of hate but also relief from our queer community that we can have such a celebration.

More acceptance however is expected that we just blend in, not stand out

That our numbers are growing rapidly, yet despite this we seem to have little impact as a group, upon social policy & community development.

more hate speech about the trans community. people associating trans people with furies and making us out to be mentally ill. people intentionally misgendering based on biological sex, or gender assigned at birth

Mostly that a lot of social organizations try to start but they never stick around very long.

There are some social groups appearing on Facebook, but they do not appear aimed at older men like me. They seem focused on young people. I don't feel that I would be welcomed.

Comments presented are verbatim from the survey and may not represent the views of the researchers.

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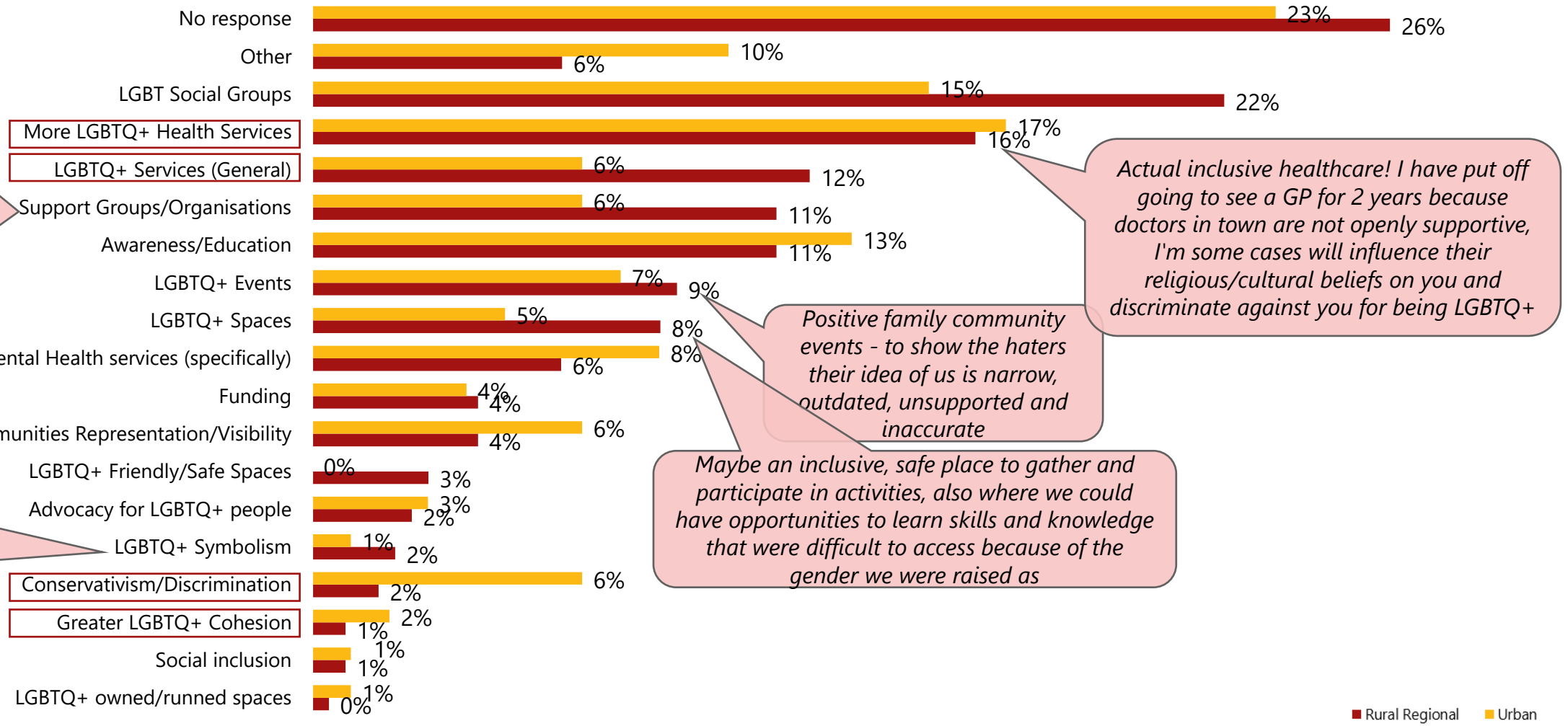
The changes that are needed

What changes do our participants think are needed?



A LGBT service such as ACON actually being in the town on a full-time bases. Events for LGBT people to help the loneliness in the community

Actual inclusive healthcare! I have put off going to see a GP for 2 years because doctors in town are not openly supportive, I'm some cases will influence their religious/cultural beliefs on you and discriminate against you for being LGBTQ+

Positive family community events - to show the haters their idea of us is narrow, outdated, unsupported and inaccurate

Maybe an inclusive, safe place to gather and participate in activities, also where we could have opportunities to learn skills and knowledge that were difficult to access because of the gender we were raised as

Workplaces making more of an effort for pride month, IDAHOBIT.

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The changes that are needed

What changes do our participants think are needed?

- Education to reduce stigma and prejudice.
- Diverse variety of events to cater to different interests.
- Greater cohesion within the LGBTQ+ communities.
- Services for and by LGBTQ+ people.
- Government taking on responsibility through legislation and example.
- Funding support to create and maintain programs.
- Visibility through symbolism and representation.
- Supporting the hidden LGBTQ+ (those coming out late, transitioning late).

There's a few services to support lgbtqia+ youth but no services to support adults. trans adults received no support while growing up and now they receive no support as adults. we were born in the wrong generation to get help because even now it doesn't exist for us.

As a 40 year old gay man who has a lot of internalised homophobia and hasn't managed to navigate his sexuality in a healthy way at formative times in his life - I feel like I have missed the boat and don't know how to "come out"and begin to live my truth. I wonder whether there are others in the same position as me, so it might be nice to have a service or community group set up to support people in that situation.

Increased community education and acceptance of LGBTQ+, both within and external of the LGBTQ+ community, service providers having a comprenhensive understanding of the needs of LGBTQ+ people, and better attempts to make spaces inclusive outside of litlle hand flag and the welcome here sticker

More LGBTQ specific services and supports, including funding for division activities, business start ups etc that work for LGBT of all ages not just youth

most LGBTQ+ groups aren't always accepting of bisexual people and i experience biphobia often in these spaces

Explicitly shows of acceptance in the public sphere, targeting against misinformation towards cis/straight people, workplaces and businesses explicitly taking measures for DEI inclusive of queer people, particularly trans people. Fact and science based evidence disproving hateful speech and talking points like actual statistics vs talking points on trans people in sports, bathroom inclusion, predation etc that people who don't care pick up and perpetuate.

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The big takeaways

The disparity between metro and rural/regional LGBTQ+ people continues.

We need more programs, supports, resources tailored and targeted for rural/regional communities.

We need to consider how we support our Trans community both within the LGBTQ+ communities and within broader society.

We need to look inwards and consider how we support diverse LGBTQ+ identities and those who are currently hidden (typically older people, and those coming out late) who arguably experience/have been exposed to greater stigma.

There is a call for more consistency in how rural and regional locations are served.

Thank you!

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